

Excavations at COWDERY'S DOWN Basingstoke

**INTERIM REPORT
Martin Millett B.A.**

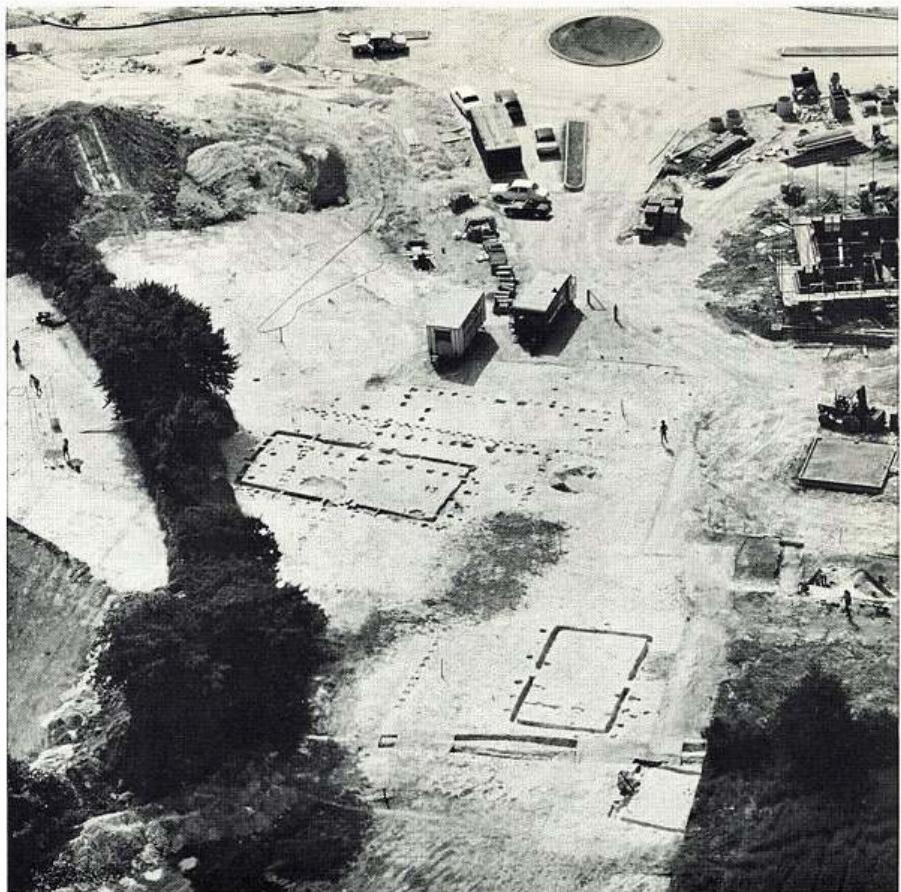
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With best wishes

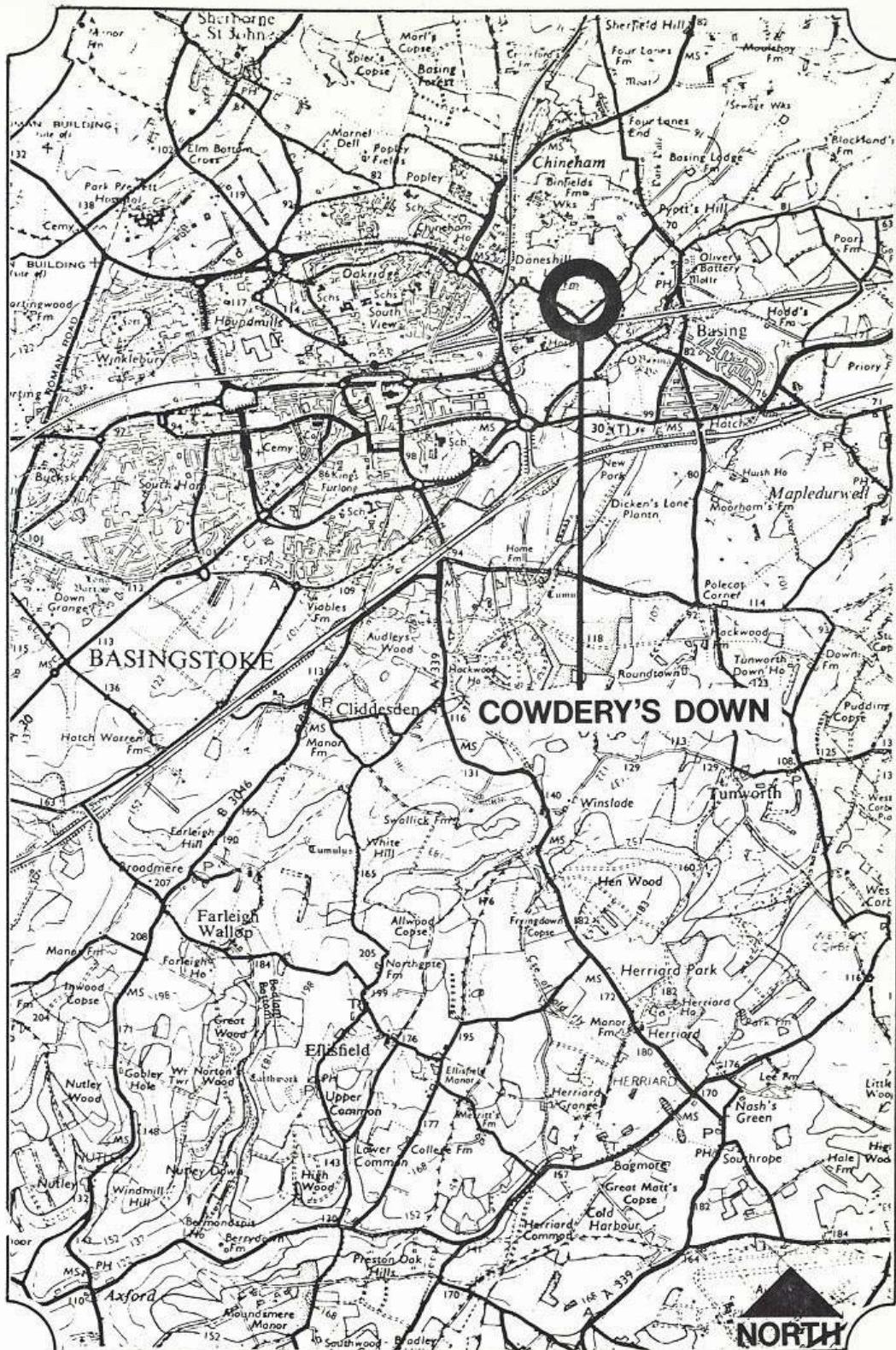
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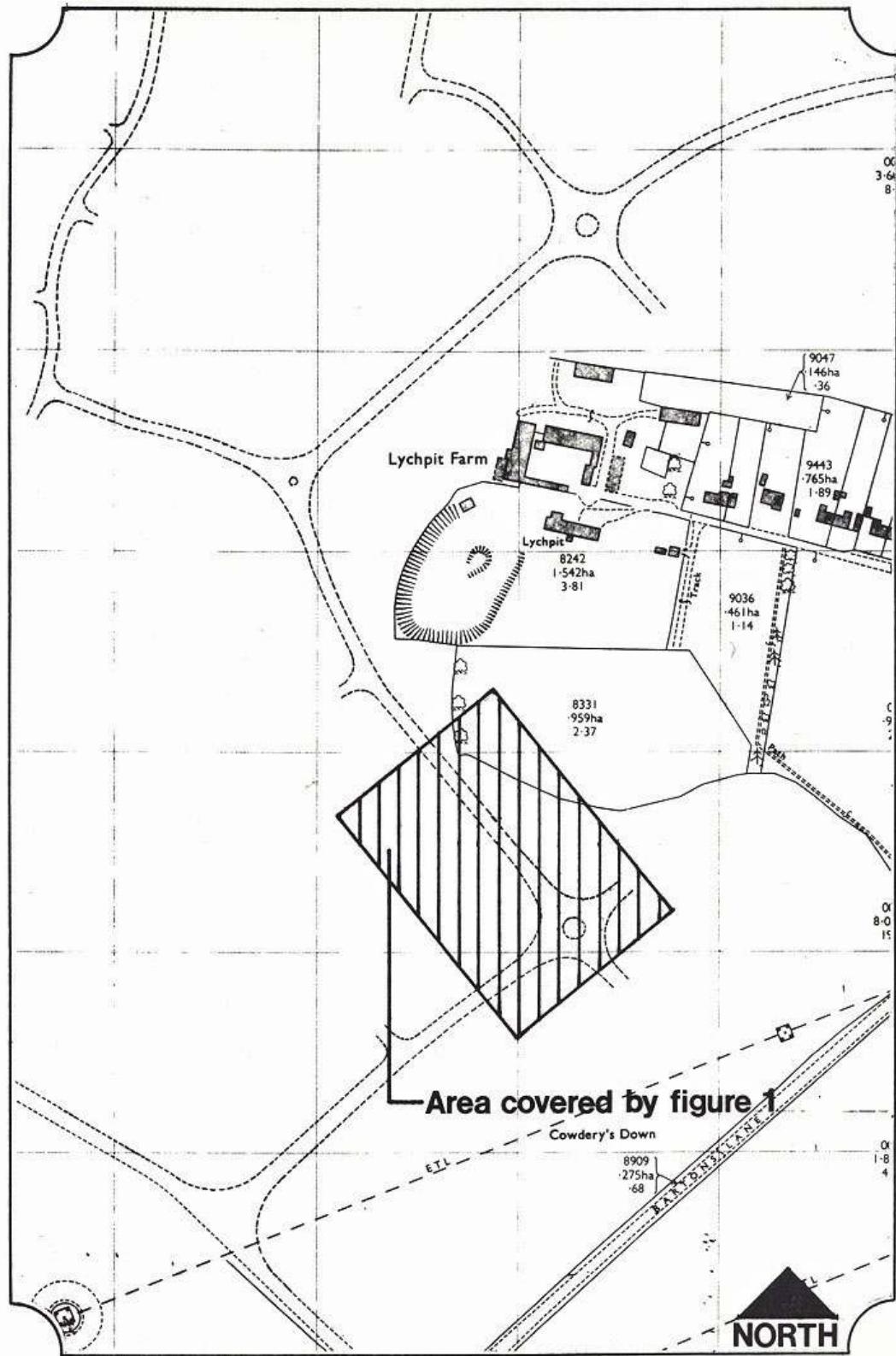
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Photograph by courtesy of R.A.F. Odham





Foreword:

BY COUNCILLOR F.A.J. EMERY-WALLIS
LEADER OF THE HAMPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

It is often difficult to reconcile the interest of archaeology and development. Problems of co-ordinating archaeological excavations to fit into programmes of road, housing and industrial development seem insurmountable. Hampshire County Council has always been aware of the importance of preserving and recording heritage where changing processes are likely to remove evidence of the past. In the development taking place at Cowdery's Down over the last two years, as a result of forward planning and co-operation on the part of the County Council Departments, private developers and the Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council, it has been possible not only to record the heritage but also to recover information of national importance in terms of the development of Anglo-Saxon buildings hitherto unsuspected on the site.

The excavations on this important site, which have been funded by the County Council, the Borough Council and the Department of the Environment, are by no means complete, and this year work will continue on land owned by the Borough Council. It has been decided, however, in view of the importance of this site, and especially of the Anglo-Saxon structures which have so far been discovered, to produce this Interim Report so that the local community as well as the archaeological community can be made aware of its importance at the earliest possible moment.

The low cost of the excavations and the smoothness with which they have taken place provides a fine example of how easy it is to record the heritage of our past without dislocating the progress of development for the future, and this clearly demonstrates how these two operations need not be mutually exclusive. The results laid out in the ensuing pages speak for themselves.



F.A.J. EMERY-WALLIS
MARCH 1980

INTRODUCTION

As part of the preparation of the Chineham District Plan which sets out the recommendations for the development of about 1,240 acres of land of which Cowdery's Down forms part, and which is approximately 2 miles north-east of Basingstoke, a survey of those sites considered to be of archaeological interest was undertaken by Hampshire County Council.

The investigation was undertaken by Michael Hughes who is the Archaeological Officer with the County Council's Planning Department, and it confirmed a number of potentially interesting sites were present, and one of these was selected for excavation.

Located on the chalk ridge at Cowdery's Down (SU 658532) the chosen site is part of the first area of land released by the County Council for private residential development.

Aerial photographs had previously identified the existence of circular and rectangular ditches which were first thought to be directly associated with the Siege of Basing House during the Civil War and to which reference is made in a number of literary sources.

Excavations were organised by the Director of the County Museum Service under the direction of the author, and commenced Easter, 1978.

Work was also undertaken during the Summer of 1979 and further excavations will take place in 1980.

The purpose of this Interim Report is twofold. Firstly to summarise the results of the excavation for those living in the area and who have expressed an interest in them over the past 18 months, and secondly to provide a basic summary and some plans of the Anglo-Saxon structures which have provoked widespread interest for those specialists in the field.

It is not my intention to provide detailed interpretations or discuss the problems of the site as this would delay publication of this Interim Report. These will be available in the Final Report which will be ready soon after the completion of the projected 1980 season.

In the meanwhile anyone wanting further detailed information is welcome to contact the author.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Those who have helped in making this excavation possible are too numerous to mention but I should like to thank especially Messrs. D. Drew, M. Haines, M. Hughes, I.R. Macneill of Hampshire County Council and the Members of the Lychpit Project Team who are also Officers of the County Council who did much to make the excavation possible.

Mr. P. Cook of Davis Estates Ltd. and Mr. P. Newman of Renway Homes Ltd. very kindly gave access to their land and provided machine time.

Mr. T. Schadla-Hall, Senior Keeper of Archaeology and a member of the staff of the Director of County Museum Service has been of constant help before, during and after the excavations.

Hampshire County Council and the Wessex Archaeological Committee (Department of the Environment) also provided financial assistance to enable the investigations to be undertaken.

The Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council is making its land available for the continuation of the work in 1980 as well as giving financial support and helping with the publication of this Interim Report.

I should like to express my greatest thanks to Simon James and Christopher Catling who acted as site supervisors and who have discussed the interpretations of the finds with me. Finally I thank Bettina Hartas for her support throughout and for typing and correcting the manuscript.

*Cowdery's Down 1978-9
Interim Plan*

0 5 10 15m

BRONZE AGE
IRON AGE

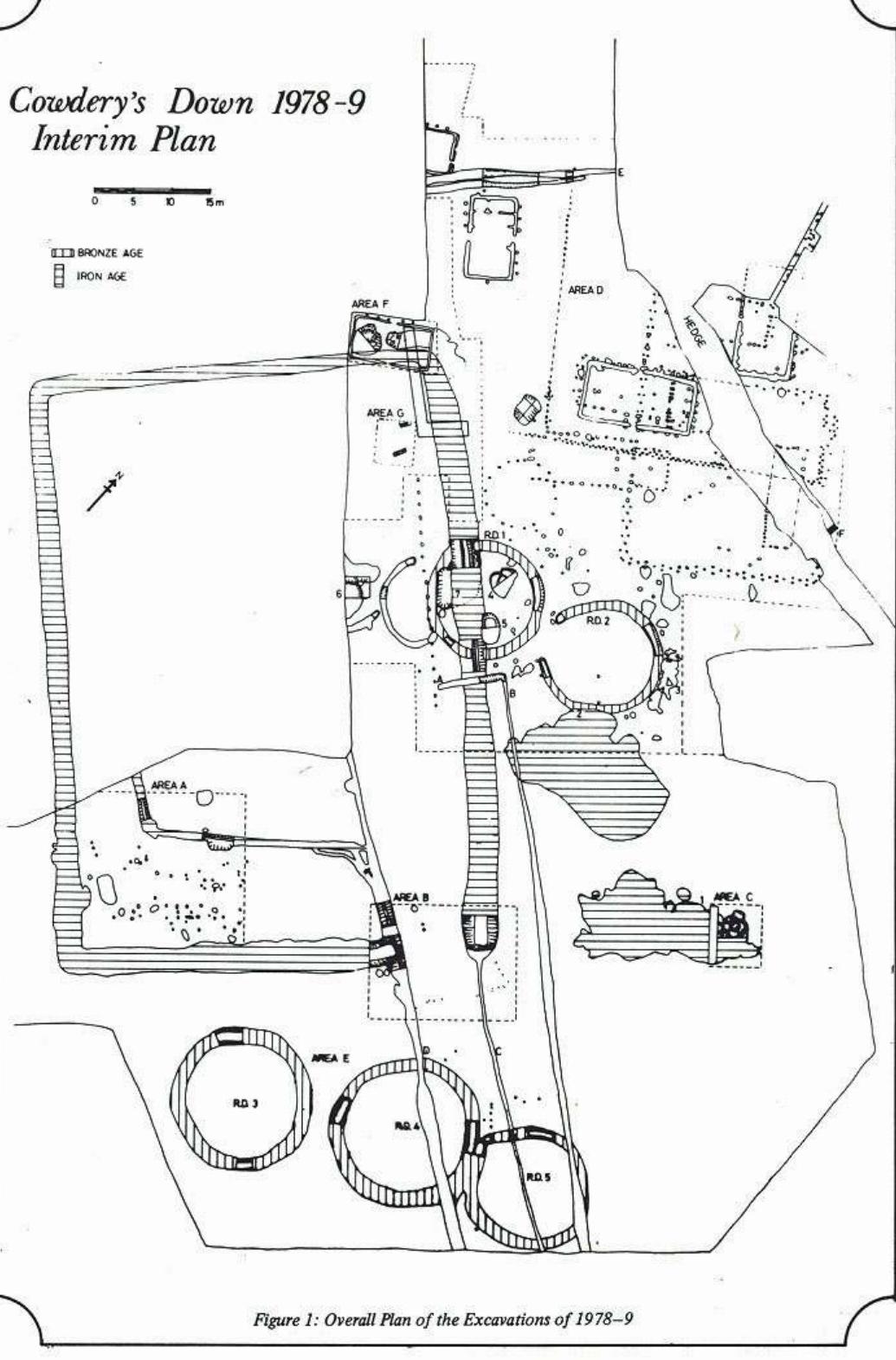


Figure 1: Overall Plan of the Excavations of 1978-9

SUMMARY

The excavations have cleared an area of about 7500 sq.m (Fig. 1) and revealed a sequence of occupation from c.2000BC to AD 1645. The main features (shown on Fig. 1) are:-

- (a) c. 2000–1500 BC a series of Bronze Age Ring Ditches (RD 1–5)
- (b) c. 1000–800 BC a series of late Bronze Age-Early Iron Age pit complexes (Fig. 1, pit complex 1 – Area C – and 2)
- (c) c. 800–100 BC Scattered evidence for an open Iron Age settlement.
- (d) c. 100 BC–AD 100 a late Iron Age Enclosed settlement.
- (e) c. AD 100–400, an Open Romano-British settlement.
- (f) c. AD 600–800 An Anglo-Saxon village (Area D, Fig. 1).
- (g) A series of medieval or post-medieval field boundaries beneath the present hedge rows. These probably date to the 17th–18th century AD, although some may be earlier.
- (h) A pair of inhumation burials in Area G (Fig. 1) which are probably associated with the Civil War encampment on the hillside in 1642–1645.

The remainder of this report will summarise some of the main features of the site, although not all phases will be dealt with in the same detail.

THE RING DITCHES

The five circular features shown on Figure 1, are in fact ditches cut into the chalk, some of which probably originally surrounded burial mounds: the most familiar monuments which survive from the Bronze Age in Britain. The five Ring Ditches on this site divide into two groups: Nos. 1 and 2 in Area D (Fig. 1), and Nos. 3 to 5 in Area E. Numbers 1 and 2 were shallow and had clay filling the ditches. Those in Area E (Nos. 3 to 5) had much deeper ditches filled with loose chalk rubble. These can be shown to be Bronze Age burial mounds, as Ring Ditch 3 contained both a crouched inhumation burial (Fig. 2) located in the northern section cut across the ditch, and a group of Bronze Age pottery, flint and animal bone was recovered from the southern part of the same ditch. The burial was of a female, about 30 years old, who wore a necklace of two shale beads, and one jet bead, and there was a flint blade behind her back. On analogy with other sites the beads date to the middle of the second millennium BC: the pottery from further up in the ditch suggests a similar date. Nothing was recovered from the other ring ditches, and it is possible that Nos. 1 and 2 in Area D were in fact the wall trenches for round houses rather than the ditches around burial mounds.

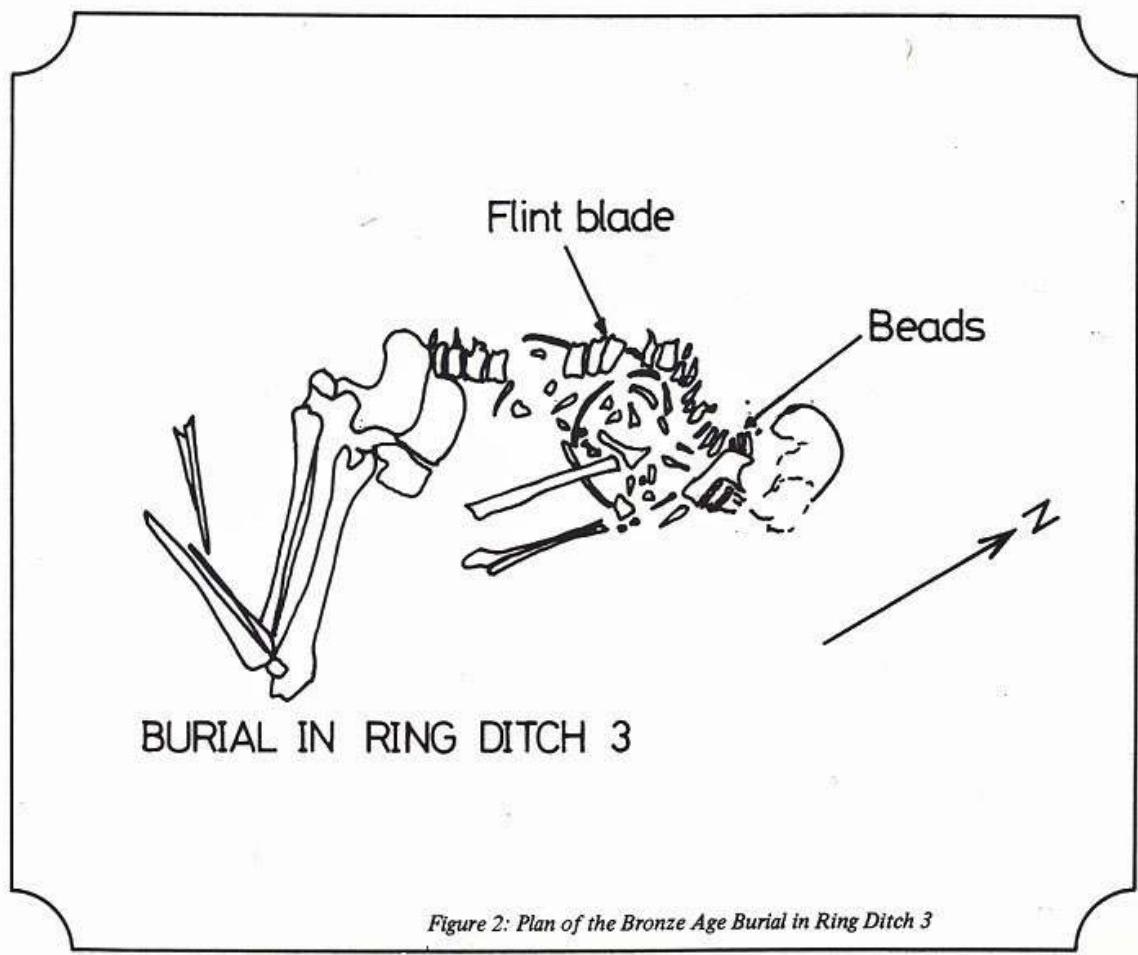
THE LATER BRONZE AGE AND IRON AGE SETTLEMENT

The main evidence of the earlier part of this period consisted of pottery and bone from a series of intersecting pits in Pit Groups 1 and 2 (Area C and the southern part of Area D). These pits may well have been dug to obtain chalk for agricultural, or constructional purposes, but they were subsequently infilled with domestic rubbish including much pottery. This pottery is currently dated to c. 1000–800 BC on analogy with similar pottery on other sites. The buildings associated with this settlement probably include the post built round house in the centre of Area D, as well as Ring Ditches 1 and 2, if indeed they were houses. Pottery from pits over the site suggest that the open settlement continued through the Iron Age until around the first century BC.

THE LATER IRON AGE AND ROMANO-BRITISH OCCUPATION

In the later part of the Iron Age, probably in the first century BC, part of the settlement was enclosed by a bank and ditch. Only a limited part of the interior of this was excavated, and this was badly plough damaged. As a result it is difficult to interpret the post holes found in the excavated area (Area A, Fig. 1), although comparison with other sites in Hampshire and the rest of southern England suggests that we have a small farmstead which would have included a series of round houses (like those from the previous periods) and other agricultural buildings. Material from the infilling of the ditches suggests that it was out of use by the middle of the first century AD. It is clear that it had been closely associated with the surrounding fields, since the eastern side of the enclosure joined a north-south field boundary (D on Fig. 1). In the middle of the first century AD this original enclosure was replaced by a much larger one, which was rectangular and had an entrance in its south-eastern corner (Area B). This enclosure was much more substantial than its predecessor, with its ditches c. 1.5m deep at the entrance. It had however not been completed, as the northern and eastern sides were shallower, and at the northern end of its eastern side it had been begun at the full width, but had only been completed with a narrow trench down the centre. This section of ditch which had not been completed, coincided with a substantial fence line on the inside edge of the ditch (Area D, Fig. 1).

When the gate (Area B) was built, it seems to have been set on the western side of the gap in the ditch, to allow for the bank on the eastern side. The construction of the gate meant that field boundary D went out of use, but this was recut after the enclosure ditches had been filled-in: that is after the middle of the second century AD. Whether or not the enclosure was originally a defensive structure, it seems to have become agricultural. In the first phase after construction, the entrance was narrowed by a hurdle fence forming an 'L' just outside the line of the ditches. This was probably used for driving animals



into the enclosure. Later, the line of the eastern side of the enclosure was continued with a shallow field boundary (C on Fig. 1) which, with the recut field boundary ditch on the other side of the entrance (D on Fig. 1), formed a droveway. At a later stage in the Roman period the boundary C was replaced by boundaries A and B (Fig. 1). These features demonstrate how the enclosure, and settlement, which it is presumed to have contained, represent only a fraction of the landscape of the hillside at this period.

By the middle of the second century AD the ditches had been infilled with domestic rubbish, and the settlement was once again unenclosed. As with the earlier Iron Age settlement we have little structural evidence for the nature of this phase of the settlement, although a scatter of tile and pottery, together with a couple of fourth century coins, indicate that occupation continued until at least the fourth century. It is possible that the settlement was centred elsewhere on the hillside, but it could equally be that ploughing has removed all the structural evidence of what are likely to have been timber buildings.

THE MIDDLE SAXON VILLAGE

Settlement sites of the Saxon period are not commonly found with only two others excavated in Hampshire (at Portchester Castle, and Chalton Down), and only about a dozen known from the whole Country from large scale excavations. Thus the discovery of another on this site is of regional importance, especially since it is well preserved, the edges of it can be defined, and it can probably be related to historical evidence provided by Charters. The analysis and interpretations of the settlement are still at an early stage, and it is hoped that further excavations in 1980 will provide further information to clarify certain problems.

In the meantime, it seems possible to suggest both from the size of the buildings, and from the comparatively small number relating to each phase, that we are dealing with a high status site, perhaps belonging to the aristocracy rather than ordinary villagers as at Chalton, for instance. What follows summarises the main evidence of the site, but avoids the detailed interpretations of structure, which will only be possible after much more analytical work.

LAYOUT

In the Anglo-Saxon period the centre of the settlement shifted from the south facing slope of the hill to the eastern end of the ridge (Area D on Fig. 1). The limits of this settlement have been located on the northern, southern and eastern sides, and the complex of buildings and fence lines have been provisionally phased. This phasing, and the evidence for it, will be summarised before the buildings are described.

The absence of surface stratigraphy over the site meant that the phasing of the Anglo Saxon structures relied on (a) a few definite stratigraphic relationships, used in conjunction with (b) relationships in plan which suggest contemporaneity. It is clear that the settlement developed organically and the three provisional phases given are both an over simplification of the development of the site, are only one interpretation, which relies very much on a single set of presuppositions. This will be remedied in the final report where a series of interpretations of the development will be offered, based on different models. The stratigraphic evidence is thus (Fig. 3):

- (i) Structure A1 is attached to a fence line.
- (ii) Structure B4 is aligned on that fence line.
- (iii) Structure C8 replaces B4.
- (iv) Structure B6 replaces A2 and is replaced by Structure C7.
- (v) Structure C8 is aligned on a second fence line which cuts the first fence line.
- (vi) Structures C9, C10 and C11 are aligned on the same fence line.

One possible interpretation of this set of relationships is shown on Fig. 3.

THE STRUCTURES

Structure A1 (Fig. 4)

Main hall c. 14m by 6m, subdivided by partition 2m from eastern end, with an annex attached to the eastern end (floor area is 90.25m²). It is a post built structure; there are doors in all four walls of the main hall. These are 1m wide, and the door at the western end is recessed. Substantial planks, c. 10cm by 50cm, are visible as door posts. Several of the post holes show 'tails' on the inside, suggesting bracing or partition walls. No external 'buttress' post holes were seen, but this may well be due to ploughing. The annex has a central post hole, and insubstantial post holes in its walls.

Structure A2

A hall, which continued beneath the hedge line, and was damaged by ploughing. The dimensions are c. 12m by 6m (a floor area of 72m²). Doors are not certainly identified. 'Buttress' posts on the eastern end, opposite alternate posts; small double posts on the corners.

The western end was beneath the hedge where it would have been substantially destroyed by the field boundary ditches. The north and south walls had been badly damaged by ploughing.

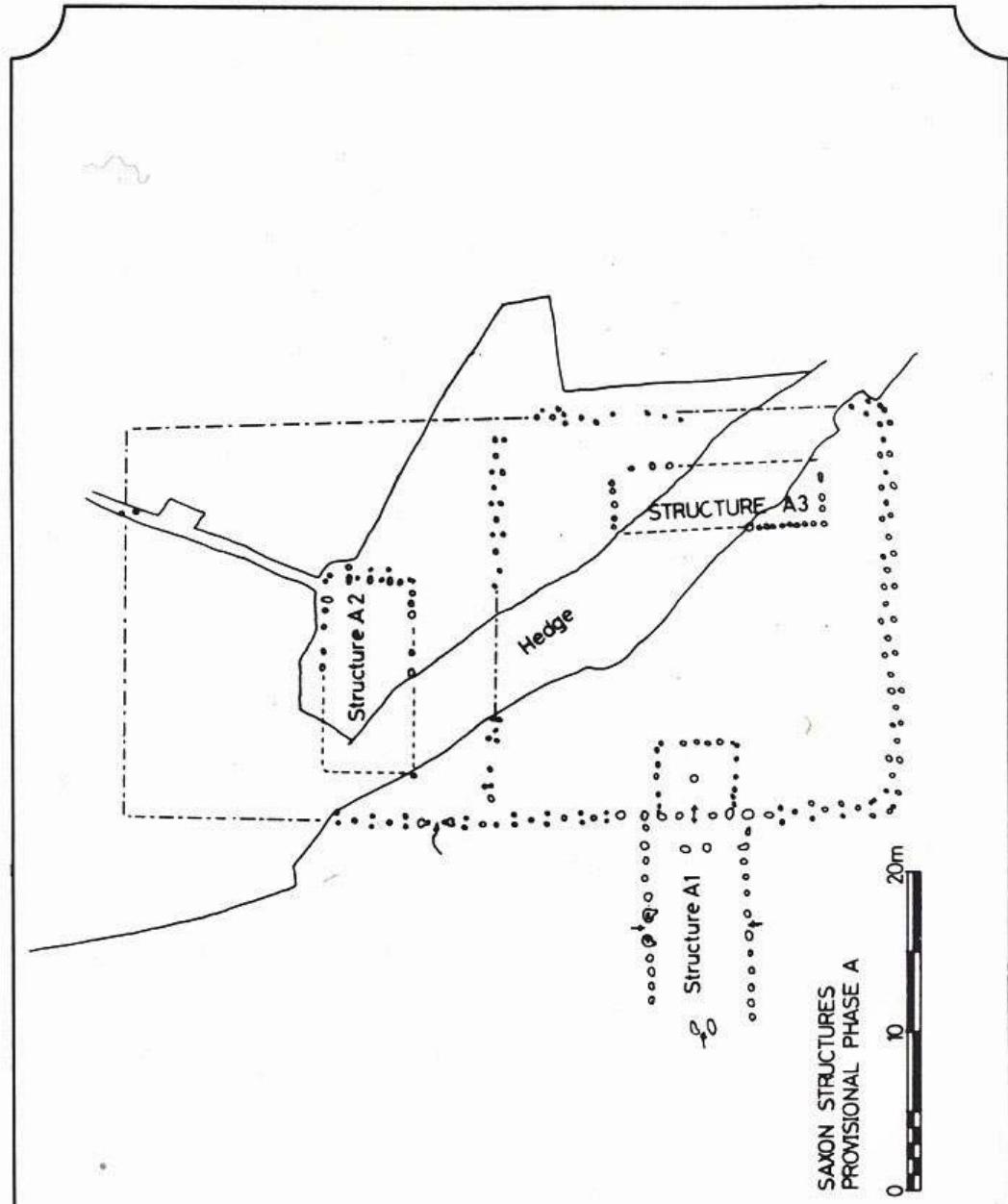
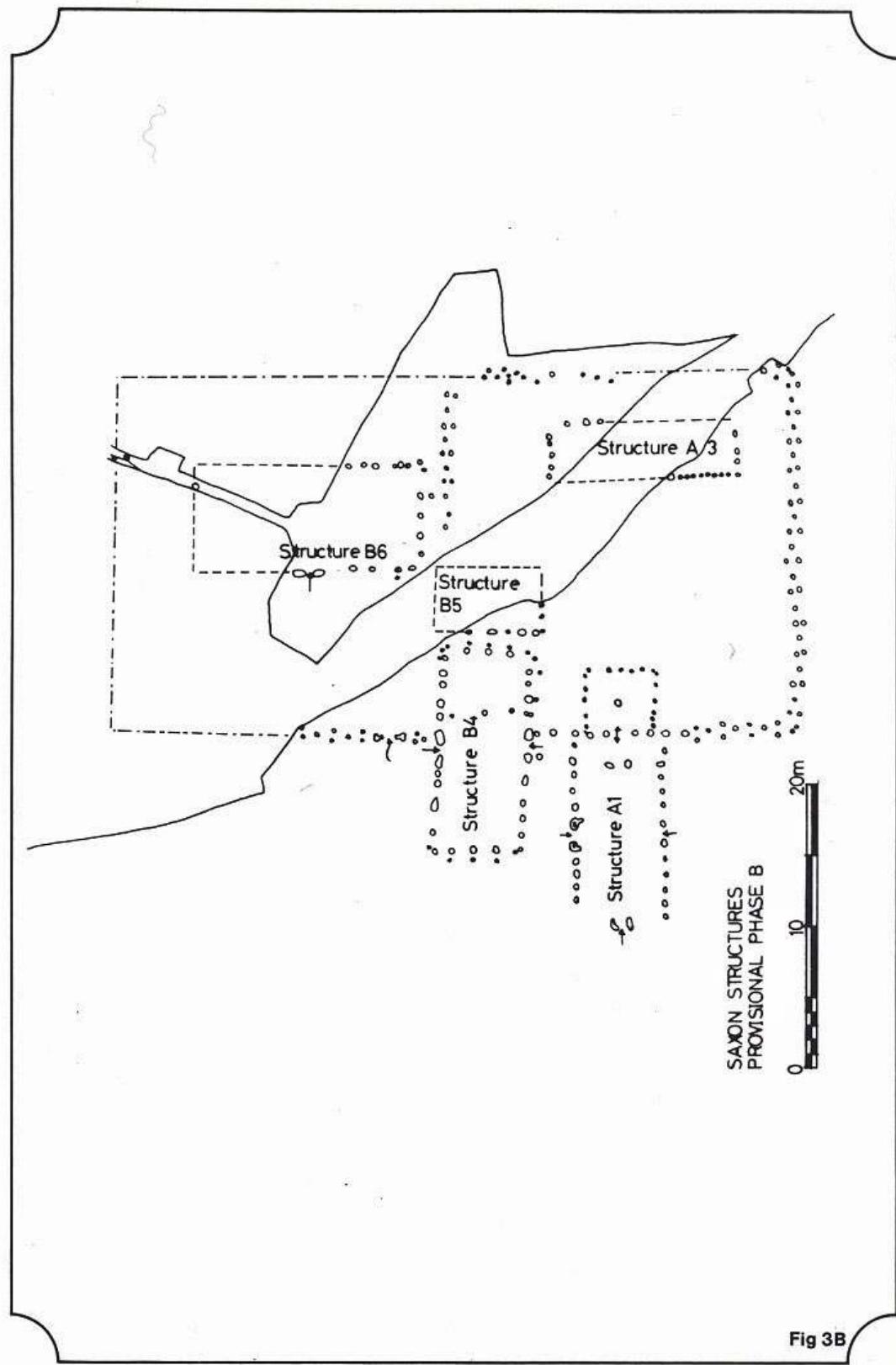


Figure 3: Provisional Phase Plans of the Saxon Village

Fig 3A



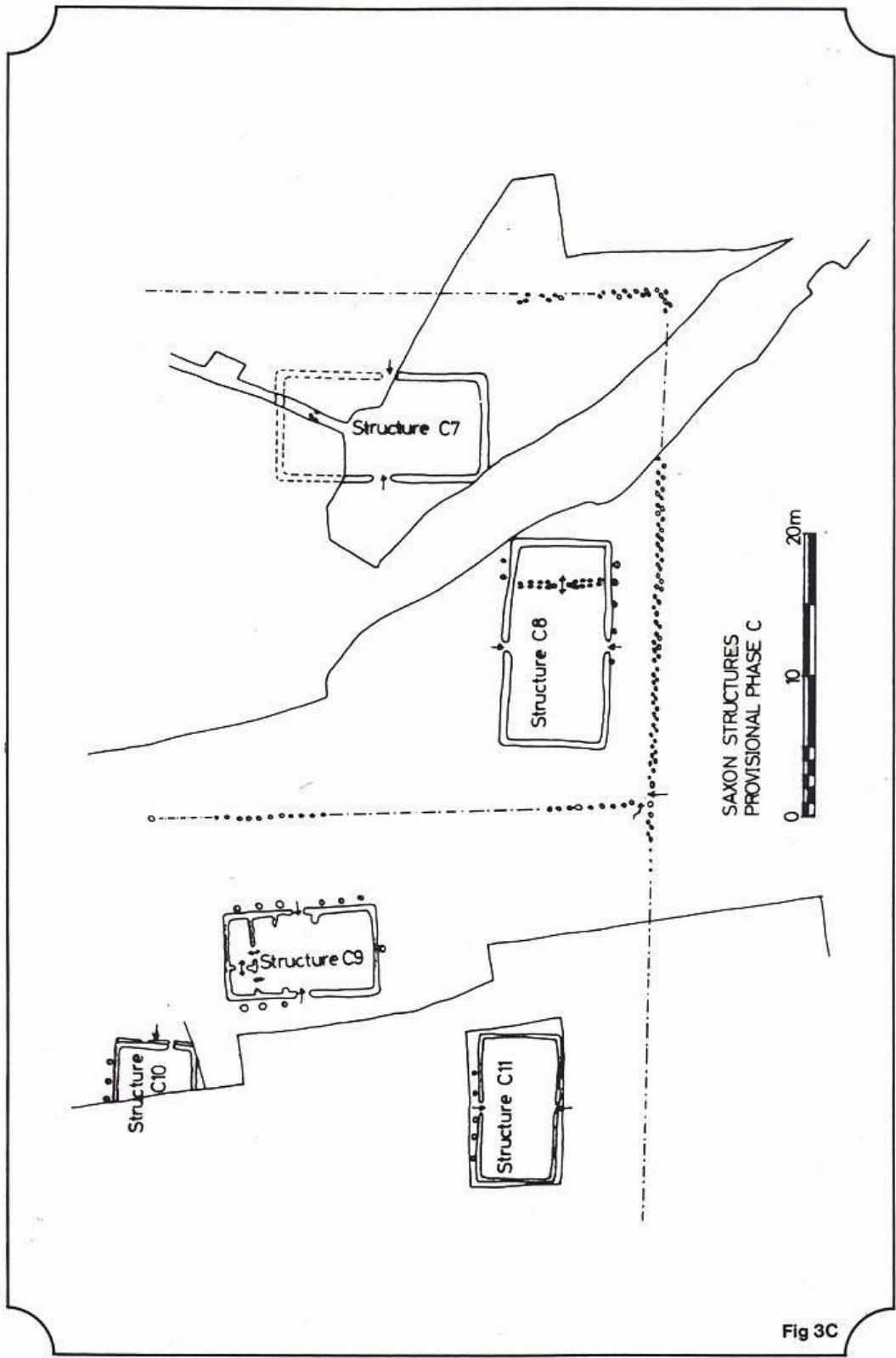


Fig 3C

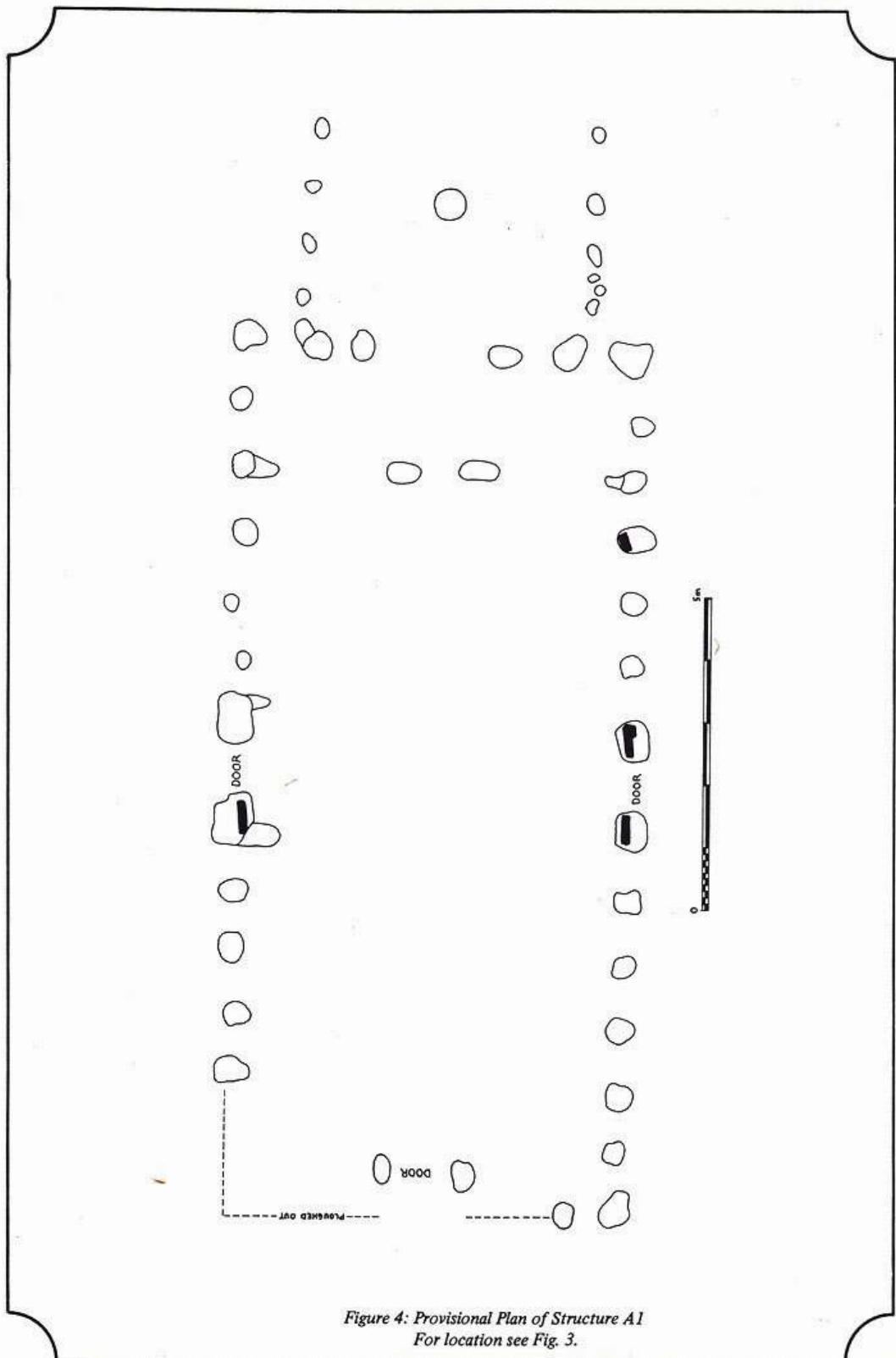


Figure 4: Provisional Plan of Structure A1
For location see Fig. 3.

Structure A3

Mainly beneath the hedge. The dimensions are c. 13m by 4m (the floor area being 52m²). Post holes are more substantial, and wider spaced at the northern end than those at the southern end, which are small and insubstantial similar to the annex of Structure A1. No evidence was found for 'buttress' posts or doors.

Structure B4 (Fig. 5)

A hall c. 14m by 6m, subdivided by a partition c. 4m from the eastern end. (The floor area is c. 84m²). 'Buttress' posts were present, although some had been removed by ploughing, and later activity; they are opposite the three main posts at either end, and opposite alternate posts (including those at the doors) on the long walls. Two doors, mid-way along the long walls, and immediately outside the fence line (Fig. 3). The doors are both c. 1m wide.

Many of the post holes on this structure showed the shadows of planks. These seem to have been very regularly planned and cut. The doorways had single large rectangular planks to hold the door, and a pair of smaller planks to clasp the walls. The walls seem to have been formed from horizontal timbers clasped at intervals by the verticals which were set in pairs in the post holes. At the corners, the double posts were apparently to revet the corners of the horizontal members. The evidence is sufficient to allow accurate reconstruction, which will be presented in the final report.

Structure B5

A small structure at the eastern end of Structure B4, in an analogous position to the annex of Structure A1. Most of it lies beneath the hedge but nevertheless, this does allow an approximate estimate of its size, at c. 6m by 5m (floor area is 30m²).

Structure B6

Hall c. 16m by 7.5m (floor area is 120m²); it is very similar in construction to Structure B4. Only just over half of it was excavated. A single door was excavated, which was constructionally identical to those of Structure B4, and was 1m wide. The 'buttress' posts were ploughed out – with two exceptions, at the southern end, and on the south western corner.

Structure C7

Hall replacing B6, c. 15m by 7m (floor area is 105m²), of wall trench construction, very similar to Structure C8 (below, Fig. 6) but with stake holes on all the sides which were excavated (cf Fig. 5 western end). Doors in the middle of the long walls were c. 1m wide.

Structure C8 (Fig. 6)

Hall replacing Structure B4, c. 14m by 6.5m (floor area is 91m²) of wall trench construction with a partition c. 2.5m from the eastern end. Doors in the middle of the long walls c. 1m wide. 'Buttress' posts along the long walls (some ploughed out).

The structural details surviving are complex and consist of:-

- (i) Planks in the wall slots on alternate sides suggesting that the construction was similar to Structure B4 with uprights clasping horizontals.
- (ii) Larger planks at the doors, corners and midway along the short walls.
- (iii) Deepening of the trenches to support these longer planks.
- (iv) Stake holes down the centre of the slot at the western end.
- (v) Posts along the centre on the line of the ridge.
- (vi) The partition at the eastern end apparently consists of split logs clasping the horizontal members, which joint into door posts in the centre.

The construction of this type of structure, obviously develops from the type like Structure B4, and again involves uprights clasping horizontals, which, at the western end at least, had wattle and daub infilling.

Structure C9 (Fig. 7)

Hall c. 11m by 6m with a partition c. 1.5m from the northern end. This partition is subdivided in the ratio of 2:1 with doors between the two halves, and doors from each room into the main room (total floor area is 66m²). There are 'buttress' posts along the long walls and in the centre of the south wall (that in the centre of the north wall, if it were present, has been removed by a later field boundary ditch, and those on the south-west side were invisible in the natural clay in that area). The structure has doors c. 1m wide in the middle of the long walls.

This structure had remarkable preservation of structural detail with all the planks visible. These show that the walls were regularly built, and perhaps framed, but without posts to support the corners. The 'buttress' posts are opposite alternate planks in the long walls. As with Structures B4 and C8 enough structural detail survives so that an accurate reconstruction can be presented in the final report.

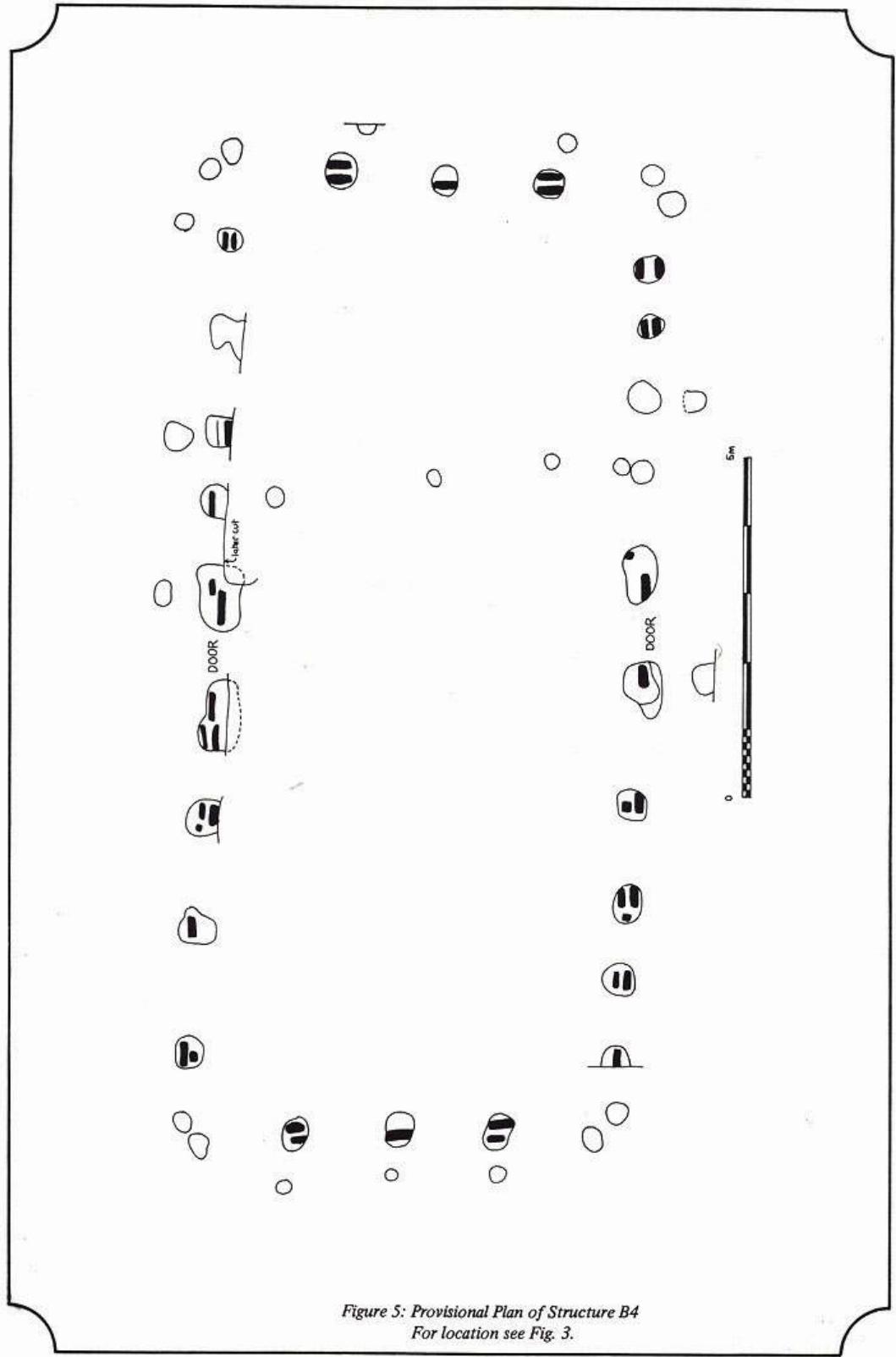
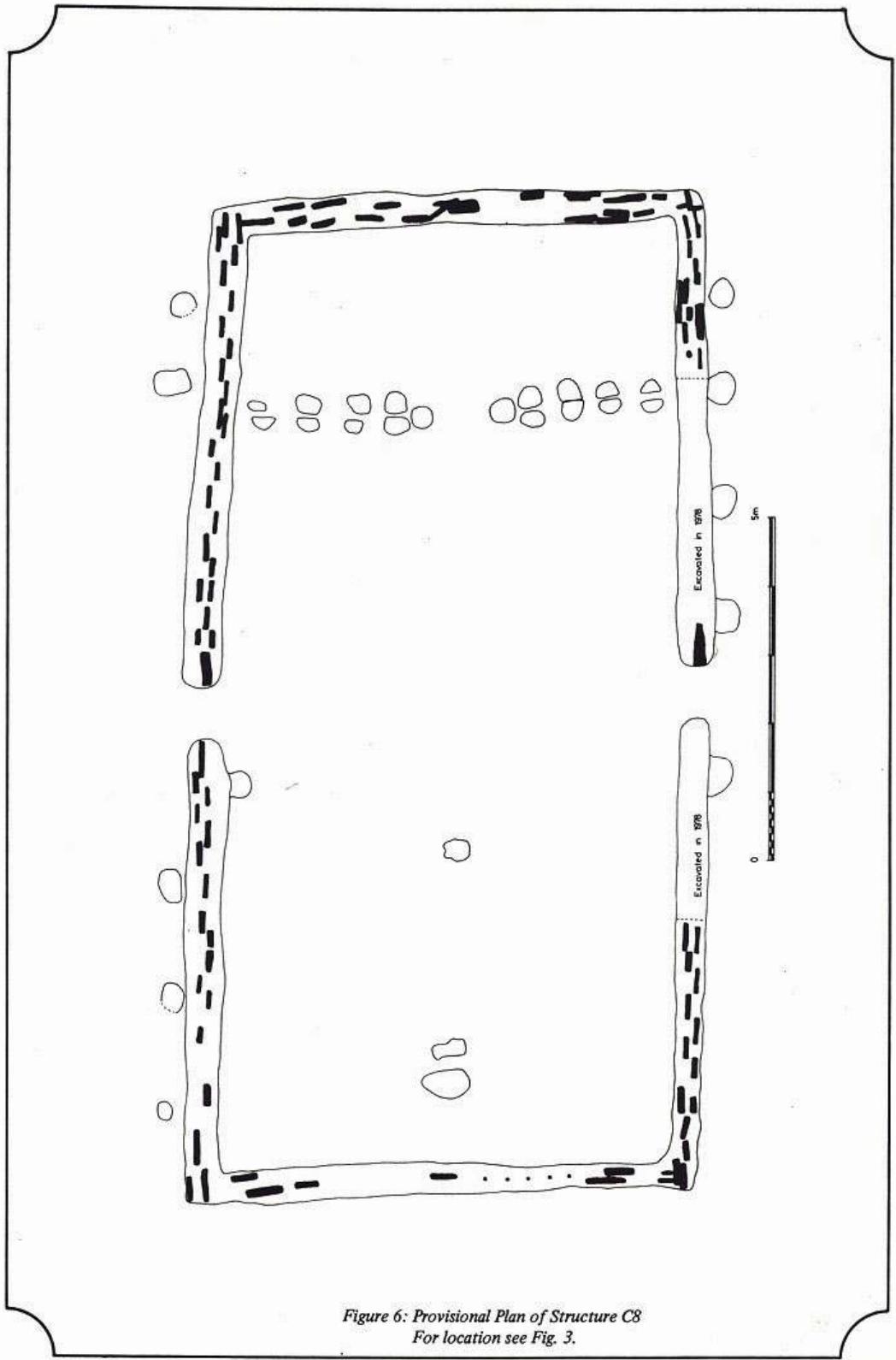


Figure 5: Provisional Plan of Structure B4
For location see Fig. 3.



*Figure 6: Provisional Plan of Structure C8
For location see Fig. 3.*

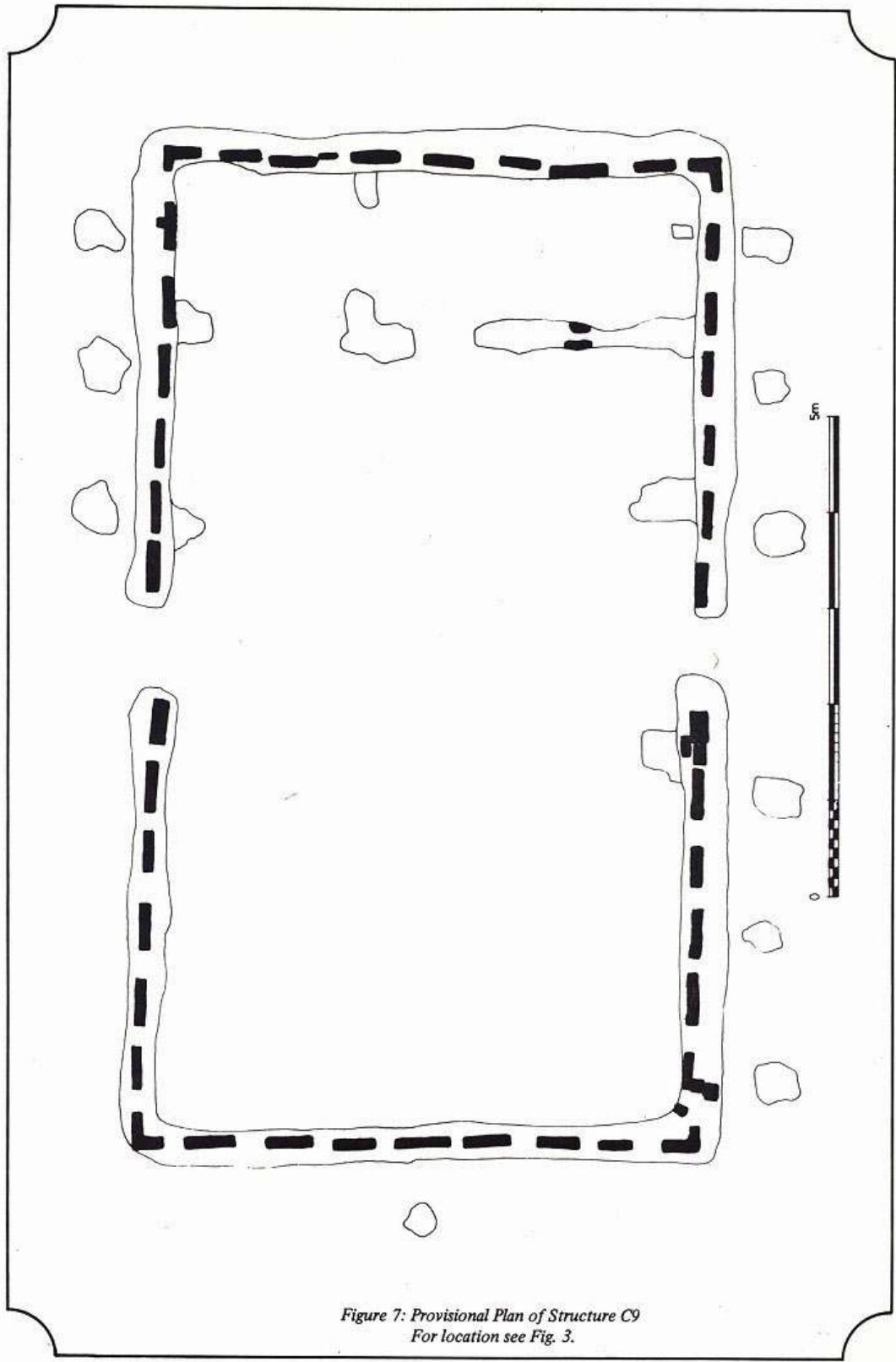


Figure 7: Provisional Plan of Structure C9
For location see Fig. 3.

Structure C10

Part of a hall c. 5.5m wide, with 'buttress' posts along the long sides and in the middle of the end wall. This wall seems to have had three phases of construction:

- (a) Central door,
- (b) rebuilt end wall with central door,
- (c) blocked door.

Planks in the slot are similar to Structure C9, but slightly smaller.

Structure C11

This hall was not completely excavated, and the excavation edge was close to the walls, owing to the limitations of work on the building site. The dimensions are c. 5.5m by 10m (floor area is c. 55m²) with opposite doors in the long walls, each 1m wide. 'Buttress' posts (cf Structures C9 and C10) were found only on the northern side.

DATING

The Anglo Saxon features produced only small quantities of typologically indeterminate pottery which is not datable. Sufficient carbon was recovered for a series of C¹⁴ samples, but in the interim dating depends entirely on analogy with structures on other sites. These, like Chalton, suggest a mid-Saxon date. The close structural analogies with Yevinger confirm this dating.

PLANNING

It is clear that, in contrast with Chalton, the structure and fence lines are laid out in a regular way with some element of what might loosely be called planning. An aspect of this is the fact that a square unit seems to have been used as a basic shape for most of the halls, as well as at least the Phase A fence. It remains to be seen whether the dimensions can be reduced to a regular unit.

THE MEDIEVAL AND POST-MEDIEVAL FIELD BOUNDARIES

Two of the hedges on the site were examined in the course of the 1979 excavation. These both revealed a sequence of boundary ditches and banks which are post-Saxon. The sequence of the east-west one along the crest of the ridge was as follows:-

- i) Primary "V" shaped ditch cutting the Saxon Hall C10, with no other dating evidence.
- ii) This was replaced by a deeper, flat-bottomed ditch which contained some 16th–18th century pottery.
- iii) The present hedge line, on the side of the bank associated with the phase (ii) ditch.

THE CIVIL WAR BURIALS

We know from extensive documentary records that the hillside was used by Cromwellian forces for their camp, and a cannon emplacement in the Civil War Siege of Basing House. Part of the original aim of the excavation was to examine any archaeological evidence relating to this episode in the history of the site. The 1978 excavation produced little evidence, with all the potential features turning out to be much older. Nevertheless, there was some pottery of about the right date recovered from several areas of the site. In 1979, whilst work was progressing on the main excavation, observation on the adjacent building site uncovered two skeletons (Fig. 1, Area G) which were excavated by kind permission of the developer, Davis Estates Ltd. Although damaged as a result of building work, sufficient evidence was discovered to suggest that they were soldiers from the Parliamentarian army. One of the skeletons in particular had what appeared to be a musket ball hole in its leg.

